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Beaches Living

Farber takes his art to highest degree



Kirk Farber took top honors this month in musical forms and Katas and placed second in black belt sparring at the Southern Sport Open Karate Championships at the Arlington PAL. (Photo submitted)

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by JOHNNY WOODHOUSE

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Fifth-degree black belt Kirk Farber is known locally for his martial arts prowess.

But the secret to his success may be juggling.

Farber's knack for keeping several projects in motion at the same time began in 1981 when he worked days as a computer programmer for Prudential Insurance and nights and weekends as a martial arts instructor in Atlantic Beach.

"I had two full-time jobs," Farber, 46, said last week from his business office in Atlantic Beach.

"One was peace of mind. The other was income."

The juggling act fell apart in the mid-1990s after Farber's rock-solid job with America's largest insurance provider got moved out of state.

Operating a martial arts studio seven days a week at

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the Beaches also took its toll on the former math major at the University of Florida.

Farber closed Body Arts, a combination karate, movement and dance studio, in 1996 to pursue computer opportunities in the dot-com world.

When that industry crashed in 2001, Farber fell back on two constants in his life: the martial arts and his talent for multi-tasking.

Today, he juggles a number of diverse entrepreneurial projects tied to his passion for the martial arts, including corporate self-defense seminars and fitness and character education for school-age children and at-risk kids.

"Kirk Farber has been the one speaker that the kids in the Pre-Trial Detention Facility get the most out of," said Ponte Vedra Beach resident Peggy Johnson, founder of the Youth Development Program at the Duval County jail.

"He breaks boards and juggles for them. He tells them that power is not about violence but about inner strength."

Johnson, an expert on professional dressing, Farber, a black belt since 1980, and motivational speaker Almon Gunter of Baldwin combined their talents three years ago to form an eight-week course for at-risk kids called "Power, Polish and Purpose."

Farber is the power component of the trio.

The longtime Beaches resident rose to the level of fifth-degree black belt in 1997.

An accomplished weapons, forms and fighting competitor, Farber made local martial arts history in 2003 when he won both the black belt forms and black belt fighting titles at the annual Jacksonville Open Karate Championships.

Surprisingly, the 6-foot-3 Farber never participated in high school sports.

Then in 1976 as a freshman at the University of Florida, he saw a flyer on a telephone pole advertising Cuong Nhu, a style of karate that incorporated, among other things, judo, which Farber had taken briefly.

Cuong Nhu founder Ngo Dong went to UF from Vietnam to study entomology in 1971.

By the time Dong earned his Ph.D. in 1974, Cuong Nhu

(pronounced chong new) was the largest intramural organization on the UF campus.

Farber took up Cuong Nhu in 1976, a year before Dong set up his first official U.S. dojo, or school, in Gainesville.

Cuong Nhu, which means "hart soft" in Vietnamese, is now taught in more than 100 dojos across the U.S.

Farber's first martial arts studio in 1981 was known as the Beaches Cuong Nhu Oriental Martial Arts. Among Farber's first students: Jacksonville Beach Mayor Fland Sharp.

"We started with a handful of students. Fland helped me put down the floor," Farber recalled last week.

"I charged \$15 a month. That's what we charge now at UNF."

Cuong Nhu is taught as a non-profit entity four times a week at the University of North Florida's basketball arena.

Students pay only an activity fee to use the UNF facility.

Farber, who operated Body Arts Studio for 16 years at the Beaches, said as many as 15 blacks belts are in attendance at the "Osprey Dojo."

"When you get to this level [black belt], it's about giving back to the community," he said.

"Now, instead of owning my own school, I can spread out and do more school programs."

Besides his volunteer work with at-risk youth at the Duval County jail, the Police Athletic League and the Jacksonville Marine Institute, Farber created F.A.C.E. (fitness and character education) in 2003 at three Beaches-area elementary schools.

The eight-week, after-school enrichment program includes fitness activities such as jumping rope, juggling, martial arts and public speaking. Farber said the program builds self-esteem and helps fight obesity among children.

Farber created a spinoff event from F.A.C.E. known as "Don't Be a Bully ... Be a Buddy!" The general assembly was held for up to 700 students at six different schools this past school year.

When he's not working with kids, Farber holds "Common Sense Self-Defense" seminars for women and seniors. He held his first such seminar in 1985 at

Prudential, where more than 300 female employees attended.

The seminar is the most requested service Farber solicits through his Atlantic Beach consulting company, The Working Warrior Inc.

His firm also offers two other unrelated services: web design and martial arts-themed birthday parties.

To date, Farber said he has designed about 15 Web sites for area businesses.

He incorporates board breaking and juggling (a combination of juggling and jogging) he learned from his twin brother Rhett, as the main event at children's birthday parties.

He has also co-authored a soon-to-be published book on sales tactics titled "Black Belt Selling."

Farber's fees range from \$75 an hour for private martial arts lessons to \$1,000 for full-day corporate workshops.

The divorced father has wasted little time training his own son in the martial arts.

Kael Farber, 6, is pictured executing a sidekick on his father's Web site, theworkingwarrior.com.

And the elder Farber is not ready to exit the competition ring anytime soon.

Earlier this month, Farber took top honors in musical forms and Katas and a second-place in sparring at the Southern Sport Open Karate Championships at the Arlington Police Athletic League.

He also served as the center judge for the tournament's children's division.

"If I'm going to talk the talk, I have to walk the walk," said Farber, explaining his reasons for competing on a local and national level.


As one of the 10 highest ranks in the world in Cuong Nhu, Farber is still one level away from master status. He'll test for the coveted rank of sixth-degree black belt next May.

"Only two men have ever created their own [martial arts] styles by the time they were 30," Farber said, referring to the late Bruce Lee and Cuong Nhu founder Ngo Dong, who died in 2000.

"I've learned from a true master. Once you do something for four or five years and become good at

it, it becomes a way of life."

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